

MANDELA FELLOWSHIP PRESIDENTIAL SUMMIT

Remarks for Administrator Bolden

August 6, 2015

It's truly great to be here with all of you. One of the great blessings of my job as NASA Administrator is the opportunity to meet some truly remarkable people – and this is one of those great days on the job. What an inspiring group of people we have assembled in this room today.

A half century ago, when Robert Kennedy visited Africa, he said *"...as I talk to young people around the world I am impressed not by the diversity but by the closeness of their goals, their desires and their concerns and their hope for the future."*

I know how he felt ...

You've come to Washington at what I believe is truly a pivotal moment, not just in African history or in American history, but in the history of the world.

You might have seen those beautiful images of Earth that have come to us from NASA's Deep Space Climate Observatory (*DSCOVR*). If you look really closely among those stunning images of green and blue and white you might be able to see a big sign that's affixed to our planet. It says, "Help wanted." (Not really)

During Robert Kennedy's trip to Africa he talked about a dichotomy that existed in the United States at the time. Frankly, it's a dichotomy that still exists today. He pointed out that on the one hand, a Black man was training to be one of humankind's first explorers in space (for the record it still took nearly two decades for Guy Bluford to achieve this goal, aboard STS-8). At the same time, even as Blacks were training to be astronauts, far too many

of our friends and family were being systematically denied equal rights under the law, and far too many struggled to find work.

I know that earlier this week, you heard from the first Black President of the United States. On one hand, his election and record of accomplishment are an amazing illustration of how far we've come. At the same time, if you've turned on CNN since you've been here, you no doubt also saw stories about racially motivated shootings, about demagoging of immigrants, and about the ongoing struggle for LGBT equality.

I know that many of these dichotomies echo both the triumphs and challenges that you are working through back at home as well.

SERVICE

All of you chose to apply for the Mandela Fellowship because you felt a calling in your heart to serve and you were all chosen as Mandela fellows because you are among your generation's best and brightest.

Your very desire to step forward and to serve is a great tribute to the life and legacy of Nelson Mandela.

Among the many brilliant truths that Mr. Mandela reminded peoples across the world was that – *“What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others that will determine the significance of the life we lead.”*

YOU BELONG

As you continue along your own journey of service, I want to encourage you to be bold, to be fearless, and to dream big.

By all means, don't listen to anyone who tells you that you can't do something or you don't belong. Don't waste your time trying to explain yourself or your identity to anyone.

Don't feel like you have to justify why you are where you are.

This applies to the workplace or anywhere else.

In my younger days, my dream was to attend the U.S. Naval Academy and to serve my country – just as my father and my uncles had done in World War II, when Black's had to fight for the right to serve in our Armed Forces.

Growing up in Columbia, SC during the days of segregation, it was an uphill battle. No one in my South Carolina Congressional delegation would provide an appointment nor nomination to the Academy as was required for admission. So I wrote President Lyndon Johnson asking for help. I never got a response, but that possibly led to Congressman William Dawson of Illinois providing me the appointment I needed to be accepted. Rep. Dawson was himself a veteran of World War I and only the third Black elected to Congress in the 20th century.

After having to fight just for the opportunity to be admitted, my classmates at the Naval Academy did me the honor of electing me class president.

Today, after a 34-year career in the Marine Corps, I have the honor of serving as Administrator of NASA under the nation's first Black President.

Now when I say, “dream big” that doesn't mean you'll always know what the future holds. Growing up, I never conceived that some day I'd become a Marine Corps jet pilot, let alone pilot the space shuttle. When I finally made the decision to apply for the astronaut program, I was 34 years old and serving as a Marine

Corps test pilot. Before that I had never even thought about being an astronaut – I figured it was just out of the question.

The man who convinced me that I could become an astronaut was a fellow South Carolinian, the late Dr. Ron McNair. He overcame obstacle-after-obstacle and went on to earn a PhD from MIT to become a noted physicist, a highly accomplished jazz saxophonist and a fifth-degree black belt in karate.

Ron reached heights that most never would have thought possible and in 1984 he reached even higher, when he became the second Black American astronaut to fly into space.

DON'T BE AFRAID OF FAILURE

So I want to encourage you to be bold and fearless. At the same time, I also want to encourage you to keep on fighting when you experience a setback.

I always tell young people that the best piece of advice I can give them is “work hard, study hard, and don’t be afraid of failure.”

As you embark on your fellowships, even as you’re being inspired, you might very well encounter a little frustration here and there – and that’s ok.

This is something that we know well in the space exploration business. Virtually every major accomplishment we’ve achieved has been the product not only of successes but also of setbacks and failures.

A good friend and mentor of mine, Robert “Hoot” Gibson, former Naval Aviator and NASA astronaut, once taught me this very same lesson in a big way. In the lead up to my first flight as a NASA astronaut, I sat nervous and sweating in a shuttle simulator

trying to impress my new six-person crew. During the simulator session, as is tradition, all was going well until it wasn't. A shuttle main engine went out – boom, right at liftoff – and while working through our procedure to determine the cause of the engine failure, a minor electrical issue popped up. This served as a distraction from the real problem. Instead of focusing on the cause of the engine failure, I worked to fix the electrical issue, misdiagnosed the minor electrical problem and accidentally killed the power to a second engine – now leaving only a single working engine – not enough to get us to orbit. Now, instead of alive in the air, we were dead in the water. All went quiet. Hoot, my commander, reached over, gave me a good pat on the shoulder, and said, “*Charles, did I ever tell you about ‘Hoot’s Law’?*”

When I responded that he hadn't, Hoot said: “*It goes like this: no matter how bad things get, you can always make them worse.*”

CONCLUSION

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, “*If you can't fly, then run, if you can't run, then walk, if you can't walk, then crawl, but whatever you do, you have to keep moving forward.*”

At NASA, the past year has included extraordinary triumphs as well as the occasional setback. I know you've no doubt experienced this in your own countries, in your own service and in your personal lives.

The fact of the matter is, while these are challenging times for our world, this is an incredible time to be alive.

Just in the past few weeks, our team at NASA has reached Pluto after a mission of more than 9 years and 3 billion miles. We've discovered an Earth-like planet know as Kepler 452b and every

day we're making progress on our Journey to Mars which will bring astronauts to the Red Planet in the 2030s.

As you fly or walk or crawl or run forward on your own journey of discovery and progress, please know how inspired I am by your service and how hopeful it makes me for our planet's future.

Thank you all very much. I'm happy to answer whatever questions you might have ...